

TAKING OVER

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CONGRATULATIONS! You are a new dean. You settle in behind a desk, one which is probably more impressive than the veneer-over-particleboard desk you had as a “mere” professor, and look at the pile of papers accumulating in the inbox. What do you do first to “be a dean?”

What follows is an imperfectly organized set of protocols for what to do in the process of being handed the deanship after a very popular dean steps down and rejoins the faculty. My predecessor, Scott Bice, spent twenty years as the Dean of the USC Law School, and was very well-liked by students, faculty, and alumni. This advice will not work for someone following an unpopular dean, nor for someone who is following a dean who left the school and will not communicate.

The first thing to concentrate on is hiring your executive secretary or administrative assistant. If the previous dean had a good one, and he or she wants to stay on and help you make the transition, say “yes.” You cannot underestimate the value of someone who knows how the office works. If you do not have this option, do your best to hire a first rate administrative assistant.

Second, get out of your chair and go see some people. Start with the faculty. Schedule a twenty minute interview with each faculty member in his or her office, during which time the faculty member is free to talk about whatever most concerns him or her. Take notes and pay attention. Appear to be concerned about each of them. Be clear that it is your goal to help each of them be the best law professor she or he can be, and also to help him or her help the school be as good as it can be. If you have some problem cases, such as people who teach their classes and then disappear into a consulting practice thirty-five hours per week, give hints as to what you want. For example, “I hope to see you more involved in the school. We really need your expertise and energy.” This lets the faculty member know of your feelings without being immediately aggressive. Of course, later on, push may come to academic shove. But do not instigate any fights while you are taking over.

Next, go see your predecessor, the former dean. Ask for a tutorial on *at least* the following: *The Budgeting Process*: USC’s budgeting system is, to say the least, complex and not obvious. I presume other universities have their own arcane systems. The former dean had to learn how the budgeting system worked and how to manipulate it to the law school’s advantage. See if he or she will share the secrets. More specifically, ask how much discretionary money you really have at your disposal. Most of us have very little, despite the huge numbers at the bottom line of the budget.

The Central Administration: If you are like most professors, you have had precious little direct contact with most of the figures in the central administration. Clearly, if you are an “outside” dean, you have even less experience. The former dean has a lot of information to share on the tensions between administrators, the

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turf wars, and the history of the law school's relationship with the university. The last point is particularly important. Your Provost will sometimes tell you that your predecessor had agreed to some arrangement, or that things have always been done a certain way. It pays to double check some of these statements with the former dean.

Major Donors: If you take over from a popular, long-running dean, you should be prepared for a certain degree of skepticism from the law school's regular, major donors. Many of them will have formed strong emotional connections to the former dean. The natural reaction of a major donor to being told of your taking over is "who's he, and why should I bother to get to know him?" You should ask the former dean to attend two or three lunches at which he or she introduces you to the most important major donors and vouches for you in subtle ways. Scott Bice did this for me, and it was a great help.

Don't relax, yet. You now need to go meet the people in central administration. Impress them with your energy, ideas, and desire to succeed. Enlist their help. Become their friends, if you can. They control permission to do things, including starting programs and asking donors for large amounts of money.

Next, huddle with your Director of Development (also known as fundraising). In addition to meeting the two or three donors with whom the former dean is willing to help, there will be 50 to 100 donors, mostly alumni, who are very important to the school. Not only do they provide the money that is the life blood of your law school, they also provide crucial contacts and a window into the concerns of alumni. Your Director of Development should help you set up 50 to 100 meetings where the Director then introduces you to these people. Prior to each meeting, your Director should give you some background on the person you are about to meet and brief you about his or her concerns and interests.

After you have started the process of meeting the donors, sit back down at the desk and make a list of your pet projects for the school. Implement *none* of them at this point. Instead, have meetings with the heads of each of the departments (for example, admissions, registrar, placement) and share with them your hopes and goals for the school (for example, better admitted students, better matching of students and classes, improved jobs for students). Ask for their ideas for how to accomplish these goals and for explanations of why these are the best methods for doing so. Urge them to tell you about how things are done at peer institutions and at schools that are as good as you aspire to be. For projects that require extensive faculty involvement or which have significant impact on the faculty, convene a committee with both faculty and department heads. The committee will study your proposals and also evaluate alternatives that will accomplish the same goals. Again, ask for comparisons with other schools. Do this for at least two reasons. First, you may get some genuine information that allows you to refine your pet projects enough to give them a real chance of success. Second, if the administrators and faculty have genuine input into and responsibility for shaping the new projects, they more likely will embrace them and help to make them work, rather than ignore or sabotage the new projects.

Next, schedule meetings *of limited duration* with a large number of student groups. Let the student leaders know that you really care about them. Even if little substance results from the meetings, it will reduce the perception of a "distant" dean

who cares little about the students. Students generally have little or no idea of what a dean does, but they really want the dean to worry about them and empathize with them. Let them know you care.

If you have taken all of these steps, you have started the transition well. Of course, before too long you will be more deeply involved in your own deanship and no longer *taking over*. Good luck with that phase. I'm doing my best to deal with that right now